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# Violence against women in public spaces: the case of Morocco

*Violences à l'encontre des femmes dans l'espace public : le cas du Maroc*

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## RÉSUMÉ / ABSTRACT

### VIOLENCES A L'ENCONTRE DES FEMMES DANS L'ESPACE PUBLIC : LE CAS DU MAROC

Cette communication se propose d'étudier les violences faites aux femmes dans les espaces publics. En effet, si on met le plus souvent l'accent sur les violences perpétrées dans l'espace privé domestique, il n'en reste pas moins que les violences subies dans la rue sont aussi importantes et graves et qu'elles constituent un véritable frein à la mobilité des femmes. Ainsi, se pose la question de l'insécurité vécue par les femmes au dehors et de la sécurité urbaine de façon générale.

Notre étude s'appuie sur les résultats d'enquêtes de terrain menées auprès des femmes à Rabat (Maroc). Nous traiterons des différentes formes de violences subies par les femmes dans l'espace public (physiques, sexuelles, psychologiques), de la perception qu'elles en ont, des conséquences sur leur santé physique et mentale et sur leur vie familiale et sociale. L'analyse portera sur les facteurs socio-culturels, qui poussent à ces violences, et également sur les réactions des femmes face à ces violences : comme les stratégies d'acceptation et de résignation – à cause de l'intériorisation des normes sexuées, par peur de représailles, du jugement d'autrui... ; les stratégies de contournement développées par les femmes pour y faire face, comme l'invisibilité par le vêtement ; ou encore les mobilisations qui sont une forme de résistance et de dénonciation de ces actes de violence.

### VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN PUBLIC SPACES: THE CASE OF MOROCCO

The purpose of this communication is to study violence against women in public spaces. Indeed, although we usually put the most emphasis on violence perpetrated in the private home, the fact remains that violence in the streets is as important and serious, in that it constitutes an obstacle to the mobility of women. Thus, the question of insecurity experienced by women in and outside of urban security in general is the real question. Our study is based on the results of field-

work carried out among women in Rabat (Morocco). We will treat the different forms of violence against women in public spaces (physical, sexual, psychological); its perception by women, the consequences on their physical and mental health and on their family and social life. The analysis will include their responses to such violence, such as strategies of acceptance and resignation (due to the internalization of gender norms, for fear of reprisals, the judgements of others, etc.); strategies to circumvent, developed by women in order to cope (like the invisibility provided by the garment); or mobilizations, which are a form of resistance and denunciation of these acts of violence in order to break the silence around violence against women.

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SAFAA MONQID a été en post-doctorat CNRS de 2008 à 2010 au CEDEJ. Socio-anthropologue de formation, elle s'est attaquée au délicat problème des déchets au Caire, pyramides d'un autre genre au pays des Pharaons et a été le pilote d'un programme collectif de recherche sur ce sujet. Autre cause, autre question brûlante dans la capitale égyptienne, la question des femmes et plus généralement du genre à laquelle Safaa Monqid s'est confrontée dans la continuité de son travail de thèse de 3e cycle qui portait sur les femmes à Rabat, au Maroc. Depuis septembre 2010, elle est professeur d'arabe au Lycée Français du Caire, mais reste fidèle au CEDEJ, au sein duquel, elle est chercheuse associée et où elle continue à travailler sur les questions relatives au genre.

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## VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN PUBLIC SPACES: THE CASE OF MOROCCO

I n Arabic cities, the fast changes in economic structures, the increasing and rapid urbanization and the demographic evolution engendered by globalization generate profound changes in social structures and lifestyles. These changes also lead to rapid changes in social relations, in particular those between men and women. Indeed, the education, the feminine wage-earner, the changes in the traditional family structure, the modernizer role of States, etc., are so many factors having engendered the evolution of the feminine condition.

If previously, space dichotomies inside/outside, private/public existed in very clear trenches existed, and the women were identified inside and confined in the private or “domestic” space for religious and social reasons, nowadays, things are different. The traditional sexual division knows a new dynamic and the exclusion of women is more and more denounced. Massively, women have reached the public sphere, traditionally a male space, and they have appropriated it. They influence this space and modify the practices and the behaviour there. The city “bastion of manliness” has therefore become more tolerant and “permeable” to the women who frequent it and create with it new relations.

However, the study of the city reveals that there are gender inequalities. Indeed, the perception and use that women have of public space is different from those of men, and to ‘live the city’ has not the same sense for a man as for a woman. Needs, schedules, the ways to occupy space, leisure activities, sociability in the neighbourhood, work, etc., are different. The city offers itself unequally to men and to women, and each behave according to the norms and values that the city requires.

Thus, this communication suggests to study violence against women in the public space. Indeed, if we mostly emphasize the violence committed in private domestic space, the fact remains that the violence undergone in the street is also important and serious, and it is a real brake to the mobility of women.

Our study is based on the results of field surveys conducted among women in Rabat (Morocco). It was conducted from a socio-anthropological perspective and from qualitative, analytical (semi-structured interview and direct observation on the ground) field work. Our sample consists of 40 women (we had conversations with 53 women in the city of Rabat). The sampling of women was carried out according to their age, social background or origin (rural or urban), by occupation, educational level, depending on their marital status, area of residence and type of habitat or based on seniority of residence in the city. In fact, we tried to interview women of different ages (19 to 70 years), educated and employed, housewives, whether from rural areas or not, and thus vary as much as possible the profiles in order to make comparisons and identify similarities and differences between them to have a broad view on the issue<sup>1</sup>. We tried to diversify the profiles by questioning women belonging to various social-economic circles, of varied age, in the home and salaried, veiled and non-veiled, etc.

We shall treat various forms of violence undergone by women in the public space (physical, sexual, psychological), their perception by the women, consequences on their physical and mental health and the impact they have outside. The analysis will also concern their reactions to this violence, such as the strategies of acceptance and resignation (because of the interiorization of the gendered norms, through fear of reprisals, of the judgements of others, etc.); the strategies to circumvent, developed by the women to cope (like invisibility through clothing); or mobilizations, which are a form of resistance and denunciation of these acts of violence in order to break the silence around violence against women.

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1. This sample is not representative in a statistical sense, but attempts to include various social categories that afford a broad view of different social positions. We have ensured that our choice, despite its limited staff, is significant, since the women interviewed represent a wide variety of situations.

## VIOLENCE AND STREET ASSAULTS AS A CONSTRAINT TO ACCESS TO PUBLIC SPACE

The issue of sexual harassment<sup>2</sup>, specifically street harassment, and violence against women in public space<sup>3</sup> has become more and more familiar. Indeed, women constantly have to deal with remarks and improper conduct, which constitute a violation of their sexual, physical and moral integrity. This can be “acceptable” or obscene verbal violence, sexual attacks such as touching in public transport or even in extreme cases rape committed individually or in groups.

If violence and sexual assaults against women question the female presence in the public space, it also raises the issue of insecurity experienced by women, urban security in general, and the place of women in the city. Most women interviewed agree that they face barriers in access to the outside. They face constraints that hinder their mobility and all confirmed that they had been victims of harassment or sexual assault, in various public spaces (streets, public transportation, or workplace). They are constantly confronted with small incidents and there is no one single perpetrator, there are dozens of men who use insulting words, who look in a disagreeable way, whistle, etc. We must therefore distinguish between serious sexual attacks and the sexual harassment established by a multitude of small attacks, which make the lives of women sometimes unbearable. Women may feel insecure in public space when they are alone, they complain of being unable to walk quietly on the street without being bothered, even if some women admit to being sensitive to the image that we send back to them,

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2. The term sexual harassment was created in the United States from the 1970s. American law recognized it as an offense in 1976 and, at the beginning of 1980s, French feminists adopt it definitively. This notion qualifies the behavior of men who use their power within the professional sphere to obtain sexual favors. The Anglo-Saxons speak about sexual harassment or about sexual terrorism to indicate sexual harassment in the public sphere in a general way. Larkin J., “sexual Terrorism on the street”, in Thomas, A. Mr. and C. Kitzinger (eds.), *Sexual Harassment, Contemporary Feminist Perspectives*, Buckingham, G.-B., Open University Press, on 1997, p. 126. See also Lieber M., « Quand les faits “anodins” se font menace : à propos du harcèlement ordinaire dans les espaces publics », in Chetcuti, N. and M. Jaspard (eds.), *Violences envers les femmes, trois pas en avant deux pas en arrière*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2007, p. 187-198.

3. If the term public place often evokes the street, it also makes reference to places as diverse as department stores, public gardens, public transportation, etc.

because they feel also valued and attractive through this behaviour (in the form of remarks or comments on their beauty). But, in general, women condemn it as a “lack of morality and respect” towards them.

So men give themselves the right “to flirt with” women and to harass them. It is a kind of symbolic sexual assault, encouraged by the anonymity of public space. Men in general (even if the group of men is not homogeneous) have sexualized their behaviour, they behave in public as if they had all the rights and treat the women outside as public property. The female body is seen only in its physical aspect, as a potential sexual object and the syndrome of appropriation, one of the most significant of the spirit of harem, does not help either<sup>4</sup>.

The presence of women in public space engenders resistance and social tensions, because men continue to identify women with the private and not to consider them as full partners. Indeed, women’s access to the outside and the expansion of women’s spaces has led to an identity crisis among men not sufficiently prepared for this mix<sup>5</sup>. Some well arrogate the right to assault women verbally or even physically, because for them, they are there because they “look for men” and in so doing, they give the right to exercise on them various forms of intimidation and violence which quickly find a social justification: “*she has only to stay at home*”<sup>6</sup>.

The women are often victims of verbal and psychological abuse in the public space, it’s a way for men to exercise their illusion of power and domination. Offensive expressions are a good example, as the names of animals are used: donkey, mule or cow, the three referring to the limited mental capacities of women; or monkey / gorilla referring to the ugliness of the girl; the hen, in reference to the sexuality, where from moreover the famous repeated proverb when we see a girl speaking to a boy : “*leave the hen and give it to its owners if it ever lays you will be responsible for it*”. The women are also attacked by sexual insults, like the word “*kahba*” (slut, whore), or obscene expressions, filled with orders and with brutality such as the expression (*I fuck you*) or (*I burst, I pierce the religion of your mother, making reference to rape*). Women undergo hurtful insults and derogatory comments about their bodies, their clothing, which is not inconsequential in their own

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4. On this syndrome see Chebel, M., *L’esprit de sérail, perversions et marginalités sexuelles au Maghreb*, Paris, Payot, 1988, p. 205.

5. De Suremain M.-D., « Les femmes dans l’environnement urbain en Colombie », in Bisilliat J. (ed.), *Face aux changements les femmes du sud*, Paris, L’Harmattan, pp. 163-191, 1997, p. 173.

6. Henry N., *Les « Mecs lourds » ou le paternalisme lubrique*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 2002, p. 12.

image of the body and misfortune to those who are dressed in a way considered extravagant. The garment is of use to these men as a measure of the morality of the girl.

This male violence, physical, verbal or psychological, which develops both in the family space and in the public space, engenders in women a negative attitude which soils their image of the body and their own self respect. A depreciation, a sterilization in its representation of themselves and their body are developed in the woman. Attitudes such as disgust, deletion, or even depersonalization may occur in girls and also women. Do we not often hear young girls say: *"Why didn't God make me a boy?!"* There is a denial of their femininity and sensuality which they try to hide.

The attack by obscene language is a way for attackers to violate the privacy of women. It is a violation of their private space, mentally and physically in order to make them understand that they are not in their correct place. It is also a way for men to prove publicly their virility and dominance over women and space; because the fact of destabilizing and of weakening a woman means dominating her. Apart from insults, which are the most frequent violence in public space, women also complain of being followed in their movements, which is a major obstacle to their mobility. In fact, undergoing an unwanted presence is no longer welcome by the women; it causes a huge psychological pressure in them. Women complain of exhibitionists and they suffer sexual touching (rubbing in the bus...). The fear of women is of hitting, or attacks with knives carried during robberies, or sexual assault... Women also face institutional barriers (identity checks by police, harassment for behaviour... ). The public space creates some tension and feelings of insecurity and, as J. Coutras said, possible insecurity is a part of the definition of the space for the women<sup>7</sup>.

These threats are different and part of everyday life for women and their movements. All this hinders women in their relationship to public space and it causes discomfort in the street. This is one of the reasons that lead women to avoid going out alone because they feel vulnerable. Moreover, aggression in the public space affects even women who are with men. The fear of women is to have remarks or be harassed while accompanied by their father or their husband, given the consequences it can have (fights that can end badly). The city is thus not always experienced positively by women, it is even seen as an area of obscenity

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7. Coutras J., « L'étude Sécu. Cités femmes, l'approche différenciée par sexe est-elle pertinente en matière de sécurité urbaine ? » Forum européen pour la sécurité urbaine, *Revue sécurité et démocratie*, Francfort, 30 septembre et 1<sup>er</sup> octobre 1999, p. 41.



and deviance, a space of anxiety and insecurity which participates in the marginalization of women and in their exclusion from public place.

The expansion of female territories has not been without consequences. It engendered acts of physical and symbolic violence against women and prevents them from freely reaching the public place, from being what they want in the city and, in the end, from expanding their relation to the city. Can we speak then, in these conditions, of the Right to the City for women, when we know that they are subject to daily violence of different natures? Women denounce the machismo and sexism that they face, and demand more equality and respect from men, who do not yet see them as full citizens in the city.

### CONSEQUENCES OF HARASSMENT IN THE STREET ON THE ACCESS BY WOMEN TO PUBLIC PLACES

Street violence affects women and has implications for the use they have of public space. Among the most important is the use of the outside. Indeed, for the majority of the questioned women, the public place limits itself above all to well-frequented places and to the places where they have to go for a particular need. The women also continue to accept that a woman, especially young, should not go out alone *“without a good reason”*. The youngest seem to have internalized this standard – their need to justify, every time, their access to the public place proves it (visiting a friend to consult schoolbooks, going shopping) –, even if the reason is quite different. The idea of going out without a reason is not well regarded. The public place answers an essentially useful purpose.

Besides the utilitarian use of space, we can mention another consequence of street harassment, namely that women need to be accompanied during their outings, which is indicative of the fact that a single woman does not yet feel at home in public space, because of social pressures and inhibitions. All women prefer to be out accompanied by their husbands, their mother, their girlfriend or their children, especially if there is no specific reason for going out. They like to have company to feel good in the public space, and also for security reasons, as these examples show:

*“In my neighbourhood, I can go out alone, but if I want to go to the city centre, I prefer to be accompanied; it is more pleasant, we discuss while walking, this may be a girlfriend or my mother, it’s more enjoyable for me especially for the company. When you’re together, you are less bothered and, you feel safe. When I’m alone, you find me walking fast because I’m going to do something, it is not pleasant for me.”* (Amel, 36 years old, married)

This example shows that women still do not feel welcome in the public place and it is difficult for them to get rid of prejudices inculcated by an education based on a strict separation of the sexes; and also because of the patriarchal norms that continue to govern relationships between individuals in society. They have internalized the feeling of being minor and lower than the men, especially in the public place, which they have internalized as being a male space where they have their place only within the limits granted by society.

#### WOMEN'S DEFENCE STRATEGIES AGAINST HARASSMENT IN PUBLIC SPACE

Attendance in public spaces creates as we have shown, among women, some tension and a feeling of insecurity, which drives them to react and to develop strategies either of resistance, or circumventing, or adaptation. These last ones can be considered as a form of acceptance by the women through their adopting of an attitude of disappearance and of "invisibility" by their clothing styles. Some women internalized this violence as being an inherent part of the public place. They also internalized the obligation to "behave themselves" in this space, which becomes a space of self- and body-control. Other women choose to react differently, by mobilization and struggle for recognition of their rights to occupy the public sphere where they are marginalized. In the past, most women that were victims of bullying or sexual assault suffered in silence for fear for their honour and that of their families; and because they were prisoners of "*what people will say*", or dare not complain because of the legal vacuum in this area. Nowadays, however, it seems that a new era, with new media, has helped bring to light issues as sensitive and taboo as harassment, and helped to overcome fears and blocks that are all beyond state control.

This role played by the new media is very important, in which it became a partner in mobilization for the women, who always had difficulty in exercising their freedom of expression. It also shows how women make use of new technologies to serve a cause, a way for them to circumvent the standards, for lack of access to traditional and official means of expression. Indeed, the development of platforms and blogs that support the needs of varied expressions of women, especially through the choice of anonymity (the nickname for more freedom of speech), the distribution of video testimonies, the appeal to Facebook and to all other forms of social media has had a big impact in social mobilizations in general and feminine in particular; they modify the practices because they bring together people from different backgrounds who did not know each other before, and they make the

fight and claims of women visible and stronger. They are spaces of freedom of expression and contesting, alternative spaces for lack of access to the public world to make their voice heard by power, which had so far judged these questions as without interest and towards whom it showed its indifference.

The new media have mobilized many women who are engaged in the public sphere and who have spoken out, whether or not they had been victims of sexual harassment, to denounce the attacks and gratuitous violence they undergo in the public places, as in the cinema, the theatre, in universities or public transportation (bus stations, micro-buses) and in their workplace. Scoffed in their physical and moral integrity, these women claim the right to live in the city and to circulate in its streets normally, without any obstacle to their freedom, as evidenced by several testimonies of women surveyed.

The prodigious development of information technologies and communication has helped bring women's voices to the public arena, and allowed women to speak and act through a network which establishes a kind of feminine force of opposition, a place of freedom and of expression. These new technologies have also shown women's ability to form networks; they have helped them in the organization of militant action; and allowed them to appropriate the street as a militant space; and to act on social change, as seen in the big impact of these collective actions on public opinion. The development of the new information technologies and communication has contributed to the creation of a public place on the scale of the planet, allowing women to express themselves. Even by 1998, 40% of women in the world<sup>8</sup> had internet access, and the World March of women in 2000 was coordinated through to the internet<sup>9</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

We note in Morocco an important appropriation of the public place by women. Their practice of the city is diversified and there is a great mixing of man/woman in the street (districts, colleges and universities, workplaces, coffee shops, gardens, beaches). The current feminine

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8. Cuchet P., « Les cyberfemmes – Les femmes sur le réseau internet », *Lunes*, n° 4, Éditions Lunes Sarl, Evreux, juillet, 1998, p. 29.

9. Bastiat B., *Le mouvement des femmes et l'accès à l'« espace public » des années 1970 aux années 1990 : exemples français, suisses et irlandais*, in Denèfle S. (dir.), *Femmes et villes*, Collection Perspectives « Villes et Territoires » n° 8, Tours, Presses Universitaires François Rabelais, p. 501-511.

reality is not any more approving of the exclusion of women. Women have become unavoidably needed for the economic and social development of the country. They participate henceforth in public life. Nevertheless, even if women have had massive access to public places, there are some limits to their presence, which is codified, and they face obstacles and undergo constraints that hinder their mobility. The city is not completely open to women, as some places are banned; it offers multiple territories such as areas for males and females, authorized and unauthorized areas.

The way women reach the public place has certain limits. Men continue to structure their identity in sexual differentiation, hence their reluctance to broaden the ownership of public spaces by women and where from also this stereotypical separation of the sexes, which shows the weight on them of the standards, the traditional values and the patriarchal mentality, fruit of a long process of family socialization. The street therefore appears as a male territory, if women venture there it is at their risk and danger. This has become a standard which the women themselves have internalized, as evidenced by the advice and prescriptions given by mothers to their daughters about the use of public space (such as: do not venture into deserted places alone, do not stay out late at night, do not respond to verbal abuse and adopt a strategy of silence as the only weapon that a woman has to protect herself and avoid reprisals...); these are, in a sense, a way to update the fear of the women of the outside and a way of limiting their movements and their appropriation of the public places. The harassment in the street is thus part of socialization of girls, because we teach them very early to face it and to manage it. Their education gives them the basics of using the city and the bases for managing the relationship between individuals within it, because they learn early on to cope, to manage and to develop defence strategies (for example, to prick a man who approaches too closely with a pin, as was demonstrated by one of our interlocutors). Some develop strategies including modest clothes, as is the case the veil, that besides its various functions, allows them to circulate freely because they are in agreement with their traditional role<sup>10</sup>. It gives them some value, a respectable image. It qualifies the woman "to be internal" and protects her from the glances of the men, while it also protects men from the "fatal beauty" of women. It is a kind of passport, legitimizing their presence in this space; a kind of shield, of symbolic barrier against male attacks, because it is a religiously strong symbol which imposes respect. The

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10. Nilüfer G., *Musulmanes et modernes, Voile et civilisation en Turquie*, Paris, La Découverte, 1993.

veil means that the woman is present in the world of men, but that she is invisible, a chosen strategic invisibility which allows her a big appropriation of the city.

The presence of women in the public place therefore engenders resistance and social tension. This shows that the spatial dichotomy internal / outside, private / public still press with all their weight on the social and spatial practices of men and women. This idea is also shared by women who see public space as male space, as shown by the analysis on the ground, they define and delimit their own place in this space and the space of their freedom. The public space or getting out is for them, in the words of P. Bourdieu, a movement that leads to men, and also to the dangers and hardships that it is important to confront. The public space is a territorial male area and the female presence there is only half-recognized. It is for women a space of temporary passage and not an area where their presence is legitimate.

Thus, despite the strong presence of women in the city, they remain immersed in the inner space. If women have occupied physical public space, they have not actually occupied it in a psychological and symbolic way, despite the will of young people to escape from the yoke of traditions.

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